

# A Brief History of Japanese Art Prints (also known as Ukiyo-e)

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Japanese art prints, or *Ukiyo-e* (which literally means “pictures of the floating world”) have become an increasingly popular art form in the Western world. Their upward, floating imagery sprang from the Buddhist ideology that joy is transient and that only detachment from desire will bring true enlightenment.



## History & Development of Japanese Prints

Japanese printmaking originated in the Edo region of Japan (now Tokyo) during a time when Japanese political and military power was in the hands of the shoguns. Japan, during that period, was isolated from the rest of the world under the policy of Sakoku, which translates into “secluded or closed country.”

In 1853, an American commander named Perry came to Japan to negotiate with the Japanese government on behalf of the USA. At the time of Perry’s arrival, Ukiyo-e was a popular contemporary art form, and many prints were on sale on the streets of Edo.

Ukiyo-e subject matter included portraits of kabuki actors, theatre scenes, lovers, famed courtesans, and landscape scenes from Japan’s history and lore. It’s no surprise that Western visitors eagerly carried Ukiyo-e prints back to their homeland, thus exposing Japan’s exotic art to the rest of the world.

To create a Ukiyo-e art print, an image was carved in reverse onto woodblocks, covered in ink, and then pressed onto paper.

At first, all prints were produced in black and white. Artists Okomura Masanobu and Suzuki Harunobu were among the first to produce color woodblock prints by using one block for each color, a very complex process.

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Producing Japanese art prints involved many people aside from the artist, including designers, individuals who planned the mold, others who cut the mold, and those who pressed the molds onto the paper.



## Offshoots of Ukiyo-e Prints

The production of these particular Japanese art prints faded out around 1912, but two new schools of print-making emerged to take its place. They are called *Sosaku Hanga* and *Shin Hanga*.

The *Sosaku Hanga* school believes that the artist must be central to all phases of the printing process, while the *Shin Hanga* movement is more traditional and believes that the publisher is most central, hence the design, blocking, and printing can be given to different artists.

## Collecting Ukiyo-e Art Prints

When collecting this exotic artwork, one must be familiar with a few Japanese terms.

Japanese art prints which are described as *atozuri* means that they were late printings, but were done with the original woodblocks. Prints that are *shozuri* are early printings, and a print said to be *fukkoku* is a reproduction.

Until the second half of the 20th century, the Japanese print-making process did not involve artists signing and numbering each print. Instead, the prints were marked with a stamp that identified the artist, the publisher, and the carver.

But after becoming exposed to the exotic culture of Japan, a craze for everything Japanese swept through Europe in the late 1860's and Japanese art prints were being shipped to Europe in record numbers. Soon, the demand for woodblock prints could not be met with originals and Japanese publishing houses began producing copies of the more famous prints.

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For the the average collector who is unable to read Japanese characters, it's often best to consult an expert before purchasing an original Japanese art print.



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